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ABSTRACT

Effective school improvement involves building capacity for change and development. Capacity building requires pressure and support from external and internal sources. Although the need for "change agency" is well established in the literature, relatively little has been written about the role of the district as an external agent of change. This paper focuses on the role of the district in building capacity for school improvement in the United Kingdom. It focuses on a highly successful school improvement project and draws upon related empirical evidence to explore the district's role as an agent of change. The paper concludes by suggesting that the current responsibilities placed upon the district are not conducive to ways of working with schools that will build the capacity for improvement. The success of a district in school improvement resides in the fact that district advisers, though external agents, have a close relationship with schools and understand the context in which they operate. District advisers act as critical friends and offer much-needed encouragement and support as schools embark upon and manage the process of change. There is a growing body of evidence indicating that the continuing role of districts in school improvement should be maintained. (Contains 18 references.) (RT)

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Building the Capacity for School Improvement

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Abstract

Effective school improvement involves building the capacity for change and development. This necessitates pressure and support from both external and internal sources. The need for 'change agentry' is well established in the literature however relatively little has been written about the role of the district as an external agent of change. This paper focuses upon the role of the district in building capacity for school improvement. It focuses upon a highly successful school improvement project and draws upon related empirical evidence to explore the district's role as an agent of change. The article concludes by suggesting that the current responsibilities placed upon the district are not conducive to ways of working with schools that will build the capacity for improvement.

Introduction

The desire for change within education is often driven by powerful ideas but only rarely is attention paid to the need to build the capacity to implement those ideas. All too often, major changes have been attempted at school level with only modest resources and commitment (Fullan, 2001). As a consequence many well intentioned school improvement initiatives and programmes have floundered or failed (Sarason, 1990). This challenge is particularly evident with respect to major reform initiatives such as school restructuring and site-based management. Such interventions necessitate far-reaching changes to school structure and school culture. Yet, insufficient attention has been paid to creating the conditions and building the capacity within schools to accommodate such major changes (Fullan,1999).

Capacity building is concerned with creating the conditions, opportunities and experiences for collaboration and mutual learning. This perspective embraces the notion of professional community where 'teachers

participate in decision making, have a shared sense of purpose, engage in collaborative work and accept joint responsibility for the outcomes of their work' (Lambert, 1998:11). Building school capacity implies that schools promote collaboration, empowerment and inclusion. It implies that 'individuals feel confident in their own capacity, in the capacity of their colleagues and in the capacity of the school to promote professional development' (Mitchell and Sackney 2000:78). Building the capacity for school improvement therefore necessitates paying careful attention to how collaborative processes in schools are fostered and developed.

Sergiovanni (2000) emphasises the 'community of practice' as the critical element in school development. He contends that 'developing a community of practice may be the single most important way to improve a school (Sergiovanni, 2000:139). This involves collaboration among teachers where learning takes place within work-based groups (Wenger, 1998). However, this implies the presence of a well functioning team of people who are able to work and learn together. Within many schools such collaboration is not prevalent, firstly because of the structures that serve to keep teachers separate and secondly because of an inherent individualism that still dominates the profession (Hargreaves,). Yet, it is evident that teacher collaboration is necessary for professional learning to occur and critically important if school improvement is to take place (Harris, 2000).

School Improvement

The Improving the Quality of Education for All' (IQEA) Project is one of the most successful school improvement projects in the UK. It acknowledges that without an equal focus on the development capacity or internal conditions of the school, innovative work will soon become marginalised (Hopkins and Harris 2000). The IQEA project works from an assumption that 'schools are most likely to strengthen their ability to provide enhanced outcomes for all pupils when they adopt ways of working that are consistent with both their own and the current reform agenda' (Hopkins et al, 1998).

The project focuses upon the teaching and learning process and the 'conditions' at school and classroom level that support and sustain school improvement. These conditions are viewed as the internal features of the school that build *capacity* for change and development. One of the most important conditions at the school level is teacher collaboration. However, it is recognised that schools as organisations tend to minimise collective, collegial behaviour on the part of teachers. Consequently, in order to create the structural and cultural changes necessary for teacher collaboration to occur, internal and external change agents provide much needed pressure and support.

The function of a change agent is to prepare and organise the school for change, to identify where teachers need support and to keep the focus of activity on improved student achievement. Change agents assist schools in establisning the right pace of change and to identify potential barriers that are particular to the school. Evaluative evidence illustrates that school improvement cannot progress very far without the influence of external and internal "agency". Earl and Lee (1998) describe successful school improvement as a chain reaction of *urgency, energy, agency and more energy*. Their work reinforces that building the capacity for school improvement requires both internal and external forces for change and development.

Within IQEA the internal impetus for change emanates from the formation of a school improvement group (SIG). All IQEA schools have to identify a small group of staff in each school to manage the project. Since the project does not seek to impose priorities for improvement on the school, but rather encourages the school to review its own problems and opportunities and to select priorities for development, the SIG are expected to take a lead in this process. Typically, the SIG is a cross-hierarchical team of between four and six members of staff. They are a non-permanent group with the school and membership can change as the project evolves and develops.

The SIGs are supported by the external agency offered by the project team and the district. Each school within the project is allocated a member of the project team and a link adviser from the district. It is their joint responsibility to assist the school through the process of change by providing critical friendship, feedback and targeted staff development. While the role and involvement of the external change agent inevitably varies across individual schools, they remain centrally important in assisting schools to build the internal capacity for change and improvement.

Building Internal Capacity for Improvement

Research has shown that effective support from outside the school is required to build internal capacity and is a pre-requisite of successful school improvement (West, 2000). In a growing number of projects this external agency is provided by the district and there is increasing evidence that highlights the particular contribution of the district in school improvement (Harris, 2000). Within the IQEA project, data is routinely collected from all participating schools to chart progress and to gauge levels of improvement. This involves collecting the views of participants about the nature and quality of support they have received. From this data source, it is possible to explore the specific contribution and role of the district as an external change agent. This analysis highlights that effective district support contributes to effective SIG working and to building the internal capacity for change in a number of ways:

Contextualising School Improvement–the district adviser has an important role to play in providing school based groups with a coherent framework for improvement that takes account of individual school context. The district adviser is well placed to understand the individual demands and needs of different schools. Consequently, district advisers can ensure that school improvement is approached in a way that addresses the particular needs of individual schools.

I see my role as ensuring that the SIG aligns the IQEA Project to the emerging needs of the school and focuses down on improvement efforts that will make a difference in their context (district Adviser).

Thinking School and Project – the district adviser also plays a central role in encouraging SIG members to think at school level as well as project level. While there are some generic features of school improvement and their translation into practice will depend upon their adaptation at the individual school level. In this respect, the district adviser has a role in ensuring that the SIG focuses on individual school development but links this to wider developments at the level of the whole project.

It would be very easy to lose sight of the big picture and to concentrate upon what was happening at school. Similarly, it would be easy to only deal with the general issues and neglect the school level. It is important to focus upon both and to be reminded of that occasionally (SIG member)

Developing a bias for action- In the initial stages, SIGs can spend a large amount of time planning with little emphasis upon action. It is important therefore, that some external pressure is exerted to encourage them to put their plans into action. There is evidence to suggest that the district adviser can influence SIGs to move towards action and can assist them to develop a bias for action that will lead to successful innovation and development.

In the first few months we just sat and talked, we planned but did very little. I think we might have continued to avoid doing anything if our district adviser had not put pressure on us to take some action (SIG Member)

Linking school development to local and national priorities- Schools that are improving have been shown to match internal development needs to external demands or priorities. External, and sometimes competing, demands arise from local and national priorities. The district advisers provide schools with

perspective on these competing priorities and ensure that school level developments reflect and where possible, complement the developmental imperatives at the local and national levels.

Schools spend a great deal of time and energy in making school improvement work for them. So it is important that this work resonates with developments locally and nationally. This sometimes requires some prompting and steering from the external adviser (district adviser)

Maintaining Momentum – Within any school improvement project a major challenge for schools is to maintain the momentum for innovation and development. As work by Fullan (1991) has shown, there is a tendency for well -intentioned change to be lost at the point of implementation and for improvement efforts to lose momentum over time. A key role for the district adviser therefore, is to monitor the progress of innovations and developments within individual schools and to provide pressure and support where progress seems to be slow.

We started very enthusiastically but other things seemed to take over and we made little progress. I guess things might have stopped right there if it had not been for the involvement of the district adviser. He made us realise we needed to be relentless in pursuing our school improvement goals (SIG member)

Evidence would suggest that district advisers provide an important source of external agency to schools. Unlike other external change agents, district advisers have a close and intimate knowledge of their schools. Consequently, they are able to adopt a distinctive interventionist stance and to work more regularly and closely with SIGs. In addition, it has been shown that district advisers provide a particular form of external support that assists schools in building the capacity for change and improvement.

The process of change for school improvement has been broadly categorised into three phases (Fullan, 1999). Phase one is the 'initiation stage' where schools are commencing work and seeking a focus for their improvement work. Phase two is the 'implementation stage' where schools are putting their improvement plans into action. Phase three is the 'maintaining and sustaining' phase where the process and practice of school improvement becomes an integral part of school development. At each of these phases, different types of external agency are required to match the particular developmental needs of the school.

At the outset, schools will be seeking to establish a developmental focus for their improvement work. While some schools might be very clear about the direction of their improvement efforts, others will need assistance and guidance. The district adviser is well placed to provide such support and is able to assist schools in diagnosing their strengths and weaknesses. This is achieved through the provision of data analysis and critical friendship.

At the district level, a great deal of data is collected and generated relating to the performance of individual schools. In addition, within England and Wales, districts and schools are in receipt of a wide range of data of a comparative nature concerning a school's effectiveness. Often, this data is not presented in a way that is accessible or easily interpreted by schools. Consequently, district advisers can assist schools in understanding and using this data for improvement purposes. The analysis of data by schools is an important means of self-evaluation and can assist schools in focusing upon the most important issues or areas for change.

Within the district *we collect value-added data that provides comparative information about school, departmental and teacher performance. If this is used carefully, sensitively and in context, it can prove to be a very powerful means of generating a focus for development and change* (district *adviser)*

Within school improvement, district s have an important role to play in offering schools varying degrees of critical friendship. It has been suggested that a critical friend is someone who provides' a successful marrying of unconditional support and unconditional critique' (MacBeath, 1998). The critical friend requires a particular set of interpersonal and group skills, many of which could be recognised as the province of 'counselling'. These have been found to include, reflecting back, reformulating, accepting, challenging and confronting. As one SIG member observed:

The district adviser has acted as a supportive but critical friend. She has provided empathy when things have been difficult, challenge when we've let things drift and a source of encouragement and praise when we've moved things on. Without this critical friendship I doubt whether we could have made as much progress.

Once schools have formulated their improvement plan, they subsequently move into the implementation phase. This requires them to instigate change and to commence their improvement activities. It is widely acknowledged that during this phase schools require a great deal of support to implement change successfully (Hopkins et al, 1996). The district adviser therefore, has important role to play in providing the practical, technical and emotional support needed by various schools at this critical stage. This support includes staff development and offering evaluative feedback.

Within any school improvement activity the provision of training and support for staff is essential. The district offers an important source of training and development. In many cases, this training is provided in direct response to a particular set of school needs or to addresses the specific needs of a group of staff within a school. District personnel can respond more quickly to requests for additional support from schools than other external agents. This 'just in time' in-service training has been shown to be an important component of other highly successful school improvement programmes (Earl and Lee, 1998). Also, advisers have local knowledge of the school and this informs their approach to training. They are more able

to match their training style and content to the needs of particular groups of staff. District advisers are more able to provide follow up visits and ongoing support that builds upon the training provision.

We asked our link adviser to run a session on co-operative group work with the whole staff and this was the turning point. They saw the relevance for them in their classroom and agreed to take part in the Project (SIG Member)

The importance of enquiry and reflection within the process of school improvement has long been established. In their study of unusually effective schools, Levine and Lezotte (1990) noted that a 'commitment to inquiry' was a consistent feature of such schools. Within the improvement cycle evaluation is an important and a necessary means of feedback. District advisers provide important evaluative feedback to schools to that allows them to take stock of progress with their innovation or development work.

Within successful school improvement, teachers are encouraged to build their own professional communities both within and outside the school. District personnel play a central role in establishing professional networks or communities through their work with schools. They provide additional professional development opportunities and use their local knowledge to establish links between schools for support and developmental purposes. District advisers also have mechanisms for sharing and disseminating good practice.

Schools that build capacity for improvement are those which use their links with other schools to maximum advantage (Harris, 2000 b). The networks established and facilitated by the district have been shown to provide schools with important opportunities to learn from each other and to solve problems collectively. These professional communities have been shown to be highly influential in enabling schools to move forward and instrumental in sustaining school improvement. There is increasing evidence to suggest that

the external agency provided by the district advisers is a crucial component of successful school improvement. Where this is not provided or where provision is limited, the progress made by schools has been shown to be significantly less than in schools where such district support is in place (Harris, 2000).

Although further research concerning the role of the district adviser within school improvement is needed, there are some tentative conclusions that can be made. The data emerging from the IQEA project demonstrated that there are four discernable and discrete dimensions of the district adviser's role as an external change agent. The first dimension concerns the way in which district advisers help translate the principles of school improvement into the policies of senior staff and into the practices of individual classrooms. This ***bridging or brokering*** function remains a central responsibility for the adviser. It ensures that links both within and between individual schools are secure and that opportunities for meaningful development are maximised.

A second dimension of the district role concerns helping staff to develop ownership of a particular change or development. This role in shaping and sharing the school's vision for improvement is a form of leadership that is ***participative and tranformative***. District advisers use "power with" and "power through" to assist staff to cohere around a particular development and to foster a more collaborative way of working (Blase and Anderson, 1995). They work with senior managers and teachers to shape school improvement efforts and take some lead in guiding staff towards a collective end.

A third dimension of the role relates to the way district advisers address individual staff and school performance. At a macro level this involves monitoring attainment, assessing performance and setting clear targets. At the micro level it suggests an important ***coaching or mentoring*** role as advisers work with teachers to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Finally, the fourth dimension of the district role in school improvement is a ***liaison or representative*** role. District advisers are links to the external environment and are important sources of expertise and information. Districts have a particular

responsibility for school performance and improvement and are therefore able to draw upon additional resource and expertise if required.

Final Comment

The evidence from the IQEA project demonstrates that the success of the district in school improvement resides in the fact that district advisers have a close relationship with schools and that they understand the context in which they operate. They act as critical friends and offer much needed encouragement and emotional support as schools embark upon and manage the process of change. There is a growing body of evidence to indicate that the continuing role of districts in school improvement is 'a role worth fighting for' (Derrington, 2000). This is a sentiment only worth endorsing if districts are able to work directly with teachers and schools in building the capacity for school improvement.

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